

# **VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE**

## **OF THE**

### **Suffolk County Legislature**

#### **Minutes**

A regular meeting of the Veterans & Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on May 11, 2006.

#### **Members Present:**

Legislator Steven H. Stern, Chairman  
Legislator Jack Eddington, Vice•Chair  
Legislator Cameron Alden  
Legislator John M. Kennedy, Jr. (Not present)  
Legislator Elie Mystal

#### **Also In Attendance:**

Richard K. Baker, Deputy Clerk  
George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature  
Ian Barry, Assistant Counsel to the Legislature  
Verna Donnan, Budget Review Office  
Deborah Harris, Aide to Legislator Stern  
Holly Rhodes•Teague, Director/Office for the Aging

Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency

Linda Bay, Aide to Minority Leader

Linda Burkhardt, Legislative Aide

Bob Martinez, Aide to Leg. Montano

Carol S. Krishnamoorthy

Fran Seims, Legislative Aide

All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken By:**

Diana Kraus • Court Stenographer

**(THE MEETING COMMENCED AT 9:14 AM)**

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

I'll ask everybody to stand for the pledge to be led by Vice Chair Jack Eddington.

**(SALUTATION)**

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

I ask everybody to remain standing for a moment of silence keeping in your thoughts and prayers our very brave men and women fighting for us overseas.

## **(MOMENT OF SILENCE)**

### **CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you.

Short but very important agenda today. But before we get to the substance of today's meeting, Holly, do you have anything to tell us?

### **MS. RHODES•TEAGUE:**

I don't really have a lot to say. We are •• we have a steady flow of phone calls on the Medicare part D because Monday is the dead line for signing up for it. If you have people in your offices who are trying to figure out what to do, you can give our office a call, we'll try to help them out. They are extending it until midnight so people can still call the 1•800 number as of •• up until midnight on Monday. So, that's •• that's been going on. And we have our luncheon next Thursday and I'm hoping you're all going to be able to attend. So, we're just busy.

### **CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Okay. Thank you. Tom and Carol. Tom, maybe you can start off by letting us you know about the very busy last few days that you've had and some of the events that have gone on here in Suffolk County.

### **MR. RONAYNE:**

Well, this month is a •• it's a very busy month anyway, but this last week has been particularly active. On Sunday I attended along with the Chairman the Welcome Home ceremonies for the first of the 69th, the Fighting •• the Fighting 69th Fighting Irish from the Huntington Armory. In attendance we had •• it was about 150, 155 soldiers from the unit who have all now returned from Iraq.

In addition to welcoming them home and they were receiving some awards and so forth from their commanding generals, we certainly were there to honor and acknowledge the 19 that the unit lost while they were over there. They had 19 killed in combat. That's a huge number.

Of the 150 soldiers in this particular unit, 75 of them are Huntingtonians. And the rest of them are from the area. Some of them are from New York City and Westchester, but the majority of them are Nassau and Suffolk residents. We •• so we were very privileged to be able to be a part of that ceremony.

I also attended and I missed •• I got there very, very late. I know that Legislator Eddington was at the Gold Star Breakfast over in Hauppauge at the Sheraton. Unfortunately in the time it took for me to get from the beach event to the luncheon, it had largely ended. I did get to meet with some of the Gold Star families and some of the other people who were in attendance but I did miss the breakfast.

Later on that same evening, we had a very special service out at the Brookhaven side of Lake Ronkonkoma where a monument was unveiled in honor of Navy Lieutenant Michael Murphy, Navy SEAL. His loss was particularly tragic. You may remember the story. He was the Navy SEAL who •• they had been inserted into Afghanistan; into a mountainous region in Afghanistan. And they quickly came under fire. He was wounded during the course of the fire fight, but knowing their position and he being the officer in charge of communications, he knew that they could not get a signal out. They could not get a word out that they were under fire and needed assistance from where they were. And he while wounded •• after having been wounded continued to climb up the side of a mountain to get to a high point so that he could communicate with the satellite and get the help that they needed.

This was the event that triggered the results when the rescue was launched. The helicopter that had gone in •• I believe there were 19 men total involved in this operation that had the rescue chopper that had gone in to •• to extract the SEAL team was shot down. And all were lost so it was a particularly tragic event, but it was largely honored at this dedication service. The Chief of Naval Operations for Special Warfare Admiral McGuire was there. He is essentially all things SEAL or special warfare within the Navy. The family obviously was there. There were a number of dignitaries in attendance. And it was a very, very humbling service when you take into

consideration everything that it represented.

And the monument •• interestingly the father •• anecdotally the father had told me that the reason that they chose the location for the monument was when Lt. Murphy was a high school student and shortly after high school, he worked for Brookhaven Parks. And he was a lifeguard at that particular beach. And what they did was they placed the monument at the beach facing the water because he always loved the water. And it was just •• it's a very wonderful monument. I would encourage all of you to go out and see it.

That is pretty much the event schedule. One more thing I'd like to report on, and then if you don't mind I would like to introduce Carol Krishnamoorthy from the Northport VA. Carol is a, as I like to say, all things homeless at the Northport VA. And she is a wonderful, wonderful asset to the administration over there.

Carol and I recently •• we've had several meetings. And we recently entered into a partnership of sorts. And I've testified previously that we've been working hard on our outreach efforts; primarily the homeless, the female and the minority veterans communities. With the staffing that we have, it's sometimes difficult to take several people out of an office and do that. In the interest of safety I don't allow it to be done as a one person operation. I always want two people out in the field because it does involve walking around in woods, you know, walking the train tracks, doing things like that. In the interest of safety for the staff, I want it always to be a two person operation.

To ease the burden on my staff, Carol has graciously entered into, again, a partnership of sorts. And she is providing to me one day a week a full•timer to join us in these efforts. And what we've have done now is when we're in the field, we have one person representing Suffolk County Veterans Services and we have one person actually physically representing the Veterans Administration. So the collaboration, I think, is going to be wonderful. We actually yesterday went out and we had our first day. We made two contacts with Veterans who I'm hoping that we'll be able to help. But going forward, now we have a rigid scheduled where we will be in the field at least

one full day a week conducting outreach.

So with that if I could, if I could introduce Carol Krishnamoorthy.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Carol, welcome.

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

Okay. Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm just delighted that Tom and I have entered into this outreach partnership because the VA is very interested in locating and assisting those veterans who are eligible for services, but that we just aren't aware of. So this is really something we're looking forward to. I've been wanting to do it for a longtime. And Tom is the perfect person and his is the perfect agency to do that with.

I wanted to let you know, I'm sure many of you know this, but we do have a very full continuum of homeless services and housing at the VA Medical Center in Northport. We do have an on-site shelter and rehab program that's run by the Salvation Army of Greater New York. So if you encounter homeless veterans for whatever reason, that it does take anyone who is in that situation. As we always say homelessness is not a diagnosis, it's a situation. And many different types of people for many different types of reasons find themselves in that situation at some point.

And with the economic and housing situation being what it is on Long Island, there are many people who are working and are without housing. But we are there. We have opened doors. Anyone eligible for VA services is welcome to come. I will house them. I will make sure they get whatever assessments they need, they get linked up to services. And we do have •• over the years, over the last ten years we have actually established a whole network of community residences that veterans with low income are able to access if they do not have family that they can live with; that are actually affordable. Many of these residences are new, newly built, are totally remodeled. It's a type of place where you would want to live and I would want to live or my veteran's not going there. Now, we do have housing for women as well as for male veterans.



I wanted to just tell you since this committee is concerned with the aging. I wanted to let you know that we started one year ago in January a special enhanced services initiative with United States Veterans Beacon House with whom we already have a VA grant and per diem partnership. Without getting too detailed about that they applied for a grant from the Grant and Per Diem Program, you know, that operates nationally for an award to receive a per diem to house homeless veterans. They did that and they received that in 1999. But a couple of years ago we jointly decided we were very interested in the sub population of homeless of frail elderly. And the VA came out with a grant for collaborative partners who wanted to go together and do something to provide enhanced services for frail elderly. And luckily for us they offered this opportunity to current operative grant and per diem program.

So Beacon House and the VA jumped on that when we put a proposal in. We were awarded the proposal. It's one of three in the country. And we already had a number of frail elderly veterans. And for the purposes of the grant and per diem program, that's veterans who are 65 years or older and have one or more chronic medical conditions or illnesses, serious illness or a life threatening disease or terminal illness and have one or more ADL deficits for which they need assistance. And we have now roughly 10 veterans. We have 16 beds that are carved out within our housing program for homeless veterans who are in that frail elderly category. I think we have 8 •• usually run 8 to 10 at all times. And I want to tell you it's been a very interesting and exciting program. I'm so happy about it. Anything you can do to promote programs for elder veterans with multiple issues and problems, I implore you to do what you can because these veterans, I have some vignettes. I'm not going to go into it. I'm sure you're very busy.

But we have one gentleman, for example, who's 91 years old. And, you know, he was a marine. And he still goes into New York City on the train. You know, he goes into see people that he knows in the city. And he's very, very active. Multiple medical conditions. Several of our veterans are on multiple medications. I mean like 15, maybe 20 medications for several really debilitating conditions. But they live very nicely in an adapted residence. These veterans live in Levittown, this particular group of veterans. And just have a wonderful life. We have had two people pass on

the from the program, but the beauty is we were able to maintain them in that home with other veterans and have them not go to a nursing home. Their illnesses were not so severe that they couldn't be maintained in a home setting. And they just have a wonderful time.

With their permission I have a couple of pictures if you •• I'll just kind of send them around if you'd like to see because sometimes the picture's worth a 1,000 words. I've got a couple pictures of the house that •• they have a house manager that lives there with them that he took. And you'll see in one of the pictures they're all standing around this brand new barbecue because the house manager bought it for them last summer so they could enjoy the 4th of July together in their backyards.

So, it's just a really wonderful program. And I'm hoping more and more veterans will be able to enter that program because as our population ages, they need that kind of specialized one•on•one care. And the VA's delighted to provide it. So, if I could answer any of your questions, I'll be happy to. Would you like to see the pictures?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Sure. Let's pass them around.

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

Okay. Thank you very much.

Just as an aside, we do have a network of 170 beds in the community for homeless veterans and it's growing. We usually add one or two residences every year. We do this with not•for•profits that we have a partnership with. And we do have partnerships with more than one. And we also do a • private landlords. We hooked up with one landlord who is a builder who really has a soft spot in his heart for veterans. And he literally builds us housing that is appropriate, that's brand new with large areas where people can be together and congregate. And he's just been a wonderful asset to us. And we're looking for other agencies that we can partner with and help to receive grants, apply for and receive grants from the VA. And it's •• so we are expanding our network every year. And if there are any questions, I'd be happy to take any questions.



**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Carol, thanks so much for being with us this morning. I have a couple of questions. What is the size of your staff that you work with in your outreach program?

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

Okay. In our outreach program •• well, it's more than •• it's more involved than outreach. I have one person that just came to me who •• that Tom him was speaking about; is actually an \\_Amercal\\_ volunteer who's working with the homeless program. And so he •• he can work exclusively with Tom or any other outreach type projects that I want to do. I have someone who works specifically with seriously mentally ill homeless veterans both men and women. And I have two positions, one for the frail elderly that I spoke to you about which I need to hire for right now. Just lost my person at the end of April. Was wonderful. So I'm •• I need to hire.

And I have a person who's running the Grant and Per Diem Program which those 60 beds that I spoke to you about. And I'm also involved in •• we also have another contract with the Salvation Army that I manage and help support veterans at the Salvation Army residence who need housing there and can't afford or not eligible for public assistance to stay there.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

What was it •• you had mentioned the federal grant. What was the amount of the federal grant, do you remember?

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

Well, there were actually two •• the VA Grant and Per Diem Program, it was in 1999 so I'm not going say I remember the exact amount. But I can you a little bit about how it works. It was several hundred thousand dollars because what happened was this particular agency went out into the community and either purchased or took a capital lease on seven different properties. And so that •• it's called a bricks and mortar grant so in other words you can purchase or you can rehabilitate properties with a capital

lease that you're going to have for a longtime with the hope to buy those properties. So this is what they did. And the per diem part means that once you actually get the properties into a habitable •• good habitable state, you can receive a per diem payment if a homeless veteran is residing in that bed. And right now this particular agency is receiving \$26 and change for every night that a homeless veteran resides in that bed.

The second grant that came, the one for the frail elderly was very nice because it actually gave us that staff person. There was actually a piece for the VA. Usually we get all these wonderful things and it doesn't come with any staffing so we're just, you know, running a little faster; but this time it actually came with a VA case manager attached to it. And for the agency it came with, not for •• for the agency that we partnered with, it came with an aid. They were able to hire an aid. They have someone who does housing placement that works with these veterans; even the elderly veterans are able to go places. They can go into senior housing once they're stabilized. And that we've actually placed two people out of the frail elderly program which is wonderful. One of whom was legally blind. So, I mean, they actually were able to hire their staff, too so we work collaboratively with them. I think their overall grant was in the neighborhood of five to 600,000. And ours was the •• actually the staff people and the car, you know, the use of the vehicle to actually go out and work with them. And that's what we got out of that.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

If I could just expand on that for one moment. Part of the outreach that we've doing out of my office is we've been visiting some of the DSS shelters because we know that in the population there will be veterans. One of the nice things, I'm sorry to say this in front of you have, Carol, one of the nice things is if I can identify a veteran in a DSS shelter that Suffolk County is paying for and we're paying considerably more than \$26 a night, we can take that veteran, open that bed up for a non•veteran, take the veteran out of the shelter, put him into one of the these programs. And the VA is picking up the tab. So there's a real •• there's a real savings and a public good to Suffolk County by collaborating and working together on these programs.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And Tom, is there any kind of an estimate out there as to how many homeless veterans there may be in Suffolk County?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

There are, but the numbers •• the numbers •• the range is so tremendous that I'm hesitant to say. The numbers that I hear in the Northport service area which essentially is Nassau and Suffolk but it's a part of \\_Visin\\_ three, the numbers go anywhere from 500 to almost 4,000. So, you know, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle but it's certainly a much larger number than we like to see.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Alden.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Is Social Services working with you? Do they do an intake as far as •• and ask ••

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Social Services •• my understanding is Social Services does as a part of their intake screening screen you for veterans status. I'm in the process right now of preparing a work sheet that we can sit down with DSS and put our heads together on. My understanding is that the only •• we don't get •• there's no flag. Nobody calls my office says, hey, we have a veteran which is what I'd to see happen.

My understanding is that they only do that for insurance purposes. If the guy's a veteran potentially they can bill the VA for some of the services. I'd like to catch it before it gets to that point, identify the veteran, interview him and see, you know, what, where, when, how, why. So, yes, they do screen for veteran status but not for the reasons that we would like to see.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Okay.

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

They do call me. We have something called a challenge process which is an inter•agency, a VA inter•agency consortium on homeless veterans. And we do have •• we meet every year at least once. We have a major program. We identify gaps in services to homeless veterans and we work on collaborative projects. In fact, the Salvation Army Northport Veterans Residence which is run by the Salvation Army of Greater New York was a result of that challenge process and of us identifying the fact that there was no shelter and rehab program at the time strictly for male and female veterans. And Salvation Army stepped up to the plate and said well, we'd like to do that.

So that's the partnership that came out of that. Took well over a year to actually do our meetings and do our collaboration before we opened the shelters doors. And they opened the doors. And that was back in 1996. So we do have very close working relationships. In fact, before Tom and I were able to go out to do some street outreach, my main outreach was through other agencies such as Social Services and Social Security that see a lot of people coming in and to do exactly what Tom said, to ask them to try very hard to identify if someone had served in the military. And we don't ask them to say are you a veteran? Believe it or not, I'm sure Tom knows this, there are a lot of people who've served in the military who don't consider themselves to be veterans. They don't have a good understanding that they're eligible for benefits even though they weren't injured actively while they were in the service. So we've asked them to say have you ever served in the military. It's a different question and you get a better answer to that so they do actually give me calls about people. People find us on the internet also.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Just one quick follow•up. Does it matter what kind of paper you got; if you got bad paper, good paper, are they still eligible?

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

It does matter in terms of VA services. You have to have an honorable discharge in order to receive VA medical and psychiatric services.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I thought it was other than dishonorable.

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

No. For VA services I think it's •• I think it's an honorable discharge. Other than dishonorable, you can be in the Grant and Per Diem Program with other than dishonorable. Now, I defer to you but I thought it was that they had to have an honorable discharge was my understanding.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I'll get a clarification on this one today.

The one exception to that that I can offer you is for some reason we've encountered several of these over the last few months where veterans who were over clemency under President Ford and President Carter's clemency program post•Vietnam, essentially the draft evaders and the deserters, they were all given bad paper. There was a discharge upgrade program where they were granted clemency or amnesty and their paper was upgraded from dishonorable to other than dishonorable. However, within those programs • and it's tough to tell looking at the document •• you have to know what the codes are on the discharges •• those people did not achieve veterans status as a result of that discharge upgrade. It's probably more so that they can at least show their discharge to their grand kids. But they do not •• they do not pick up eligibility for VA services and they do not achieve veterans status for any other purpose.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Eddington.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Thank you. I was just going to add that I know you can get a general discharge under honorable conditions. And I think they do qualify.

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

Yes, they do.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Usually a medical situation.

**MS. KRISHNAMOORTHY:**

Yes, they do.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Well, obviously critical issue. And the numbers even given the wide range should be unacceptable to all of us living in Suffolk County. And so certainly it's something that we want to continue the dialogue and continue to work together on programs at all levels of government to do the very best that we can with our veterans.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

That's why we're placing the emphasis on this issue that we are.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Anybody else? Good. Okay. Thank you.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Thank you. Also, also I'd like to remind you that Saturday May 20th at eleven AM Armed Forces Plaza in front of the Dennison Building is our annual Armed Forces Day Services. We've have got a nice program prepared. We've got the choir from the Kings Park High School coming. They will be providing us some musical interlude. We've got •• they'll be doing a couple of patriotic presentations.

I've also got a refurbished UH 34D \\_Serkorski\\_ that will be on deck. We've going to be landing the helicopter a couple of hours before the event begins. Obviously we don't want to be blowing people around the lot. But we've already got •• the insurances are in place. Everything is resolved. I've got •• the fire department will be on hand, fire truck and an ambulance for the landing and the take off. But that will be on deck. We'll have that as a static display as well as refreshments and hopefully a well attended event.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

All right. Tom, what was the start time on that?



**MR. RONAYNE:**

Eleven AM.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Okay. Old business, new business? Motion to adjourn?

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Motion.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Second.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. We are adjourned.

**(THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 9:50 AM)**  
**\\_ \\_ DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**